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ABSTRACT

Forty-two faculty members in their first, second, or third year of employment at small, private, liberal arts colleges in Ohio were asked to describe their initial impressions of faculty and administration, to reflect on those things that helped or hindered their transition into the college and local communities, whether or not they had intended to begin their careers at small colleges, and what surprises they encountered in their new positions. They were also asked to suggest how colleges could ease the difficulties encountered by young faculty members. Respondents appeared sincerely committed to teaching and many reported being attracted to small colleges because of their own experiences as students. They reported struggles in balancing teaching, research, and service while making long commutes or adjusting to life in a rural community. Their suggestions include being honest in portraying the college and the community to faculty candidates, realizing the importance of intrinsic motivators, recognizing that faculty do not need to live in the local community to be valued members of the college, discussing with senior faculty the negative effects of old grudges and political factions on new faculty, and creating the position of Director of Faculty Development to oversee development of new faculty. (Author/DB)

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Making the Move:
The Transition from Graduate Student at a Ph.D.-Granting University to New Faculty Member at a Small, Private, Liberal Arts College

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Paper presented at the
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Abstract

Making the transition from graduate assistant to new faculty member is often difficult. Making the transition from graduate student at a Ph.D.-granting university to new faculty member at a small, private, liberal arts college in a remote location is even more difficult, involving change in both professional and personal arenas.

In this study, 42 faculty members in their first, second, or third year of employment at small, private, liberal arts colleges in a nine-college consortium centered around eastern Ohio were asked to describe their initial impressions of faculty and administration and to reflect on those things that helped or hindered their transition into the college community and the local community. They were also asked whether or not they *intended* to begin their careers at small colleges and what surprises they encountered in their new positions. Finally, they were asked to make suggestions as to how their colleges and communities could ease the difficulties encountered in their first years as faculty members.

What emerged was a picture of earnest young professionals, most of them sincerely committed to teaching and many attracted to small colleges because of their own experiences as students, struggling to figure out the required balance of teaching, research, and service while making long commutes or figuring out how to create a satisfying life in a rural community in which they feel they have little in common with their neighbors. Suggestions include being honest in portraying the college and the community to candidates for faculty positions, realizing the importance of intrinsic motivators, recognizing that faculty do not need to live in the local community to be valued members of the college, discussing with senior faculty the negative effects of old

grudges and ancient political factions on new faculty, and creating the position of Director of Faculty Development to oversee a systematic program for the development of new faculty.

MAKING THE MOVE: THE TRANSITION FROM GRADUATE STUDENT AT A PH.D.-GRANTING UNIVERSITY TO NEW FACULTY MEMBER AT A SMALL, PRIVATE, LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

Making the transition from graduate assistant to new faculty member is often difficult. Making the transition from graduate student at a Ph.D.-granting university to new faculty member at a small, private, liberal arts college in a remote location is even more difficult, involving change in both professional and personal arenas.

The purpose of this study was to explore the intentions of new faculty at small, private, liberal arts colleges; specifically, did they *intend* to begin their careers in small teaching-oriented colleges, or were these "default positions," taken because they could not find employment in research universities? Secondly, what did they find upon arrival at their new positions? How were teaching, research, and service viewed and valued? What helped or hindered transition into the college and local communities? And finally, what suggestions do new faculty have for administrators and senior faculty in making this difficult transition a positive rather than a painful experience?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 42 faculty members in their first, second, or third year at six colleges in a nine-college consortium of independent liberal arts colleges in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. The average size of the institution is just over 1,200 students. Two of the participating faculties were at colleges located in small towns, three were in tiny villages about an hour from the nearest population center, and one was in a suburb of a major city.

The participants ranged in age from 28 to 65, with a median age of 36. Twenty-two were male, and 20 were female. Nearly two-thirds were married, and about half had children. For more than 60%, this was their first full-time teaching position. About a third each were in the first, second, or third year in this position. Teaching fields included education, business, health and physical education, and the arts and sciences in about equal proportions.

Procedures

The director of the consortium granted permission to conduct this research and provided names and e-mail addresses of the deans (or vice presidents for academic affairs) of the nine participating colleges. The deans were asked via e-mail to provide the names and e-mail addresses of faculty hired in the past three years. Those not responding within two weeks were e-mailed again. Seven of nine deans provided 115 names and e-mail addresses of new faculty.

A pilot survey was sent to six second- and third-year faculty at one of the institutions. Feedback was provided, and the survey was revised for clarity and to include more information about the effects of the transition on faculty members' families.

The revised survey (appended) was e-mailed to 115 faculty. Respondents could reply on-line; a copy of the questionnaire was included as an attachment for those who wished to mail in their responses and thus preserve anonymity. Those not responding within two weeks received another e-mail request. Forty-two faculty members (36.5%) from six colleges responded. (There were no responses from the faculty of one college.)

Results for the quantitative questions were tallied, and averages and percentages were computed. Key words and phrases from the open-ended questions were analyzed to see if individual answers could be generalized as patterns of thought or experience.

Results

Intentions

When asked, "Did you intend to begin your career at a small college?," 21 (50%) responded "Yes," and 12 (29%) responded "No." Three (7%) did not intend to work at any college. The remainder did not take size into consideration when searching for a position. As one faculty member stated, "I delight in teaching....What and where don't matter."

Those who intended to begin their careers at small colleges were attracted by the possibility of one-on-one interaction with students; the focus on teaching, rather than "the grind of a big research place"; the ability to use a wide variety of their skills; close relationships with other faculty, including those outside their field; and most often mentioned, "the ability of make a difference" in the lives of their students. For two, the school they chose was "like the one I graduated from," and for another two, it *was* the school from which they graduated.

Two of the participants who did not intend to start at a small college viewed their positions as stepping stones to positions at larger schools. One noted, "This is a good place to start, given the lighter research loads."

Impressions

Overwhelmingly, colleagues were described as "friendly," "nice," "supportive," and "dedicated." One respondent mentioned that there were a "few dinosaurs" at his

college; another wrote that there were "fewer rotten apples than expected." One wished that there were more young faculty members. One confessed an underlying concern about "the intellectual worthiness of these folks."

Slightly more than half said that teaching was the most valued of the triumvirate of teaching, research, and service. Seven (17%) said that teaching and service were equally valued. Seven (17%) said that all three were equally important. One reported that "Keeping students happy" is the first priority. Two were "still figuring out" what was valued on their campuses.

Support for Teaching

Nearly half the participants indicated that they had had some formal instruction in improving teaching during their first year or years of teaching. Five (12%) mentioned consortium workshops; others mentioned national and regional conferences and campus workshops. It was obvious that one of the colleges supports new faculty with a year-long orientation program for new faculty, which seems to be valued. Most found help in less formal situations: conversations with colleagues in their own department and in the education department, articles given to them by colleagues, and observation of colleagues' classes. Some relied on feedback from students. Six (14%) said that they had had no help in improving their teaching.

Balancing Research

Only four respondents (10%) appear to be happy with their research agendas. One said that his location actually helps his research—there are "few distractions" in his small town.

Most are struggling to keep a research agenda going but have had to make adjustments to do so. Among the strategies are the following: focus on research during spring and summer breaks, adhere to a rigorous schedule, slow the pace of research projects, research ideas that grow out of class assignments and campus responsibilities, and pursue other scholarly work that is useful to the college.

A few (7%) replied that they have not been able to do any research in their new position.

Expectations and Surprises

Prior to taking faculty positions, these new faculty members expected to work hard, be lonely, have a hard time adjusting to life in a small town, and grapple with campus politics. These expectations appear to have been realized.

Other aspects of faculty life were more surprising. Among these were the following: poor academic preparedness of students, inappropriate classroom behavior, amount of time spent on activities other than teaching, informality of decision making, ease—or difficulty—of obtaining resources, and unhappiness and pettiness—or extreme dedication and competence—of some faculty members.

Helps and Hindrances: College and Community

When asked what helped their transition into the college community, several mentioned the friendliness of the faculty and the staff. Eight (19%) specifically mentioned new faculty orientation programs; four (10%) mentioned a formal relationship with a faculty mentor. Networking with other new faculty and attending social functions with faculty were also mentioned as having been helpful. For some of the faculty, having

taught in other arenas and "coming home" to the college from which they graduated eased the transition into the college community.

Hindering the transition for many faculty was the "long commute" from home to work. Others reported lack of mentoring, mismatch with formal mentor, and the feeling that "things are done like they've always been done, and nobody is very explicit about filling in those of us who are new."

Most often mentioned as helping ease the transition into the local community was having a friend, neighbor, or colleague who introduced the new faculty member to the area. One faculty member was welcomed by a church congregation; another felt that "having a kid in the school district" was beneficial.

For most of the faculty, however, very little or nothing was done to help introduce them to the community—and many feel that they will never become part of the larger community. Lack of time and "breaking into established relationships" proved to be major—but perhaps temporary—stumbling blocks. Perceived differences in rural vs. urban orientation and social and class distinctions are perhaps impossible to overcome. One faculty member stated, "I believe that the local community exists in another universe that happens to occupy the same space at the same time as the college community." Another one wrote that after two years, "It still doesn't feel like home once I'm off campus." He characterized the local community as made up of a "mean-spirited, bigoted, hateful population base of red-neck losers."

Advice to Administrators and Senior Faculty

Advice to administrators and senior faculty falls into three categories: extrinsic motivators, such as pay, benefits, and working conditions; intrinsic motivators, such as

respect, recognition, and support for professional growth; and information about the college's culture and its challenges in building a collegial learning community.

Nearly half the respondents said that low pay, limited benefits, and heavy workloads adversely affect their enjoyment in working at a small college. Specific recommendations including increasing salaries, reducing the workload to 3 + 3, upgrading facilities, make affordable housing available, and help faculty members' significant others with employment.

Faculty members also suggest "high touch" solutions: "Respect new faculty members," "Trust them—give them freedom and autonomy," "Value the faculty—they are the most important resource of the college."

Professional development is important. Specific recommendations include the following: including new faculty on important committees, providing a strong mentoring program, pairing new faculty with senior faculty for advising purposes, and inviting new faculty to express their opinions at faculty meetings. One respondent wrote, "Give opportunities for professional growth, but recognize that they need to rise through stages in their development. Give them space to develop and learn about the college community before placing them in positions in which they must participate in critical planning and decision-making."

In order to improve the "fit" between faculty members and the college, these new faculty suggest "painting a clear picture" of the institution for aspiring applicants for faculty positions, giving accurate information about the college's student profile, and hiring professors who are a good match for the institution. Once hired, these new faculty members want to be part of an educational community, not pawns manipulated by

campus factions. "Clear up pre-existing conditions," wrote one respondent. Eliminate the "grudges and disgruntlement."

Discussion and Recommendations

What emerged from this research was a picture of earnest young professionals, most of them sincerely committed to teaching and many attracted to small colleges because of their own experiences as students, struggling to figure out the required balance of teaching, research, and service while making long commutes or figuring out how to create a satisfying life in a rural community in which they feel they have little in common with their neighbors.

It is obvious from their responses that many have found a "home" in academe. They love their students and their work; given opportunities for professional growth, they will develop into valued senior faculty who contribute much to their chosen institutions.

Others, however, are themselves disgruntled. As one respondent wrote, "I didn't know what I was getting into." The mismatch—with the college and/or the community—is serious, and it may or may not have a remedy.

Administrators who wish to attract and keep promising new faculty should consider the following recommendations that emerge from this research:

1. In order to reduce "buyer remorse," be honest in portraying the college and the community to candidates for faculty positions. Address the challenges inherent in the student population, the existing faculty, and the local community. Hire faculty who understand the challenges and want to tackle them.

2. Realize the importance of intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivators. Respect, recognition, and inclusion in the work and play of the campus are within the budgets of even the most financially-strapped of colleges.

3. Recognize that some exceptional faculty members will never be a part of the community in which your college is located. Help them *live* where they can be happy and *commute* to your campus. Ride sharing, facilities for occasional over-nighters, and sensitive scheduling of classes and special events can help faculty contribute to the college community without living next door.

4. Discuss with senior faculty the negative influence that old grudges and ancient political factions can have on new faculty.

5. Systematically plan and implement the development of new faculty. Adopt an effective mentoring plan. Provide exemplary support for teaching, research, advising, and other service. Elicit feedback from faculty development efforts, and adjust future plans accordingly. Most colleges have a Director of Development. Surely a Director of Faculty Development could provide long-range gains that are at least as valuable.

The new faculty members in this study are inherently idealistic. Most of them have chosen colleges that they feel will fulfill their dreams of being teachers and scholars. They are willing and able to help us build that "college shining on a hill" or whatever our most idealist collective selves can envision. It is our sacred honor to help them.